



5 Ways to Promote a Healthy Culture in Your Workplace

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Introduction

As health insurance premiums continue to rise, more employers are turning to workplace wellness programs to control costs.

Industry research has found that such investments pay off for the employers that implement them. For example, the University of Michigan Health Management Research Center estimated that an organization saves \$350 annually when a low-risk employee remains low risk and \$153 when a high-risk employee's health risks are reduced, according to an article on Inc.com. That same article also reported that another study of worksite wellness programs (published in the American Journal of Health Promotion) yielded an average 27 percent reduction in sick leave absenteeism, 26 percent reduction in healthcare costs and 32 percent reduction in workers' compensation and disability management cost claims.

Despite the proven effectiveness of these programs, many HR professionals still shy away from them, worried that they would be costly or complicated to implement. But there are a number of simple, inexpensive ways to promote wellness in the workplace. This paper explores five key concepts for promoting a healthy wellness culture in your organization, including practical tips for putting those ideas into action.



Start With the Right Goals

There are plenty of worthy wellness goals to choose from, but most companies don't have the time or the resources to pursue them all – at least not at the same time – so it's best to do some strategizing before you make decisions about which tactics to pursue.

"It seems so simple, you would think it's barely worth mentioning, but it's key to understand what you're trying to accomplish before you even start to lay out a wellness initiative," says workplace wellness expert Fran Melmed.

"When you spend the time upfront on both program strategy and communication strategy, you start from a much stronger place," says Melmed. "From there you need to commit to ongoing evaluation and adjustment – again, with the program or initiative itself and the communication that supports it."

"Designing a wellness intervention, implementing it, measuring it and seeing results takes a long time," Melmed explains. And the time span is even longer for companies that have a "trust deficit," which has become more common after years of layoffs and asking the employees they retained to continually do more with less. So she advises employers to create a health promotion plan that "spans years, not a year."

What to Consider

- Are you trying to get employees to start something, stop something or maintain something? For how long?
- Does the initiative affect all employees or only a certain segment?
- Do you have the patience and commitment to wait to see results?

Create an Office Environment that Supports Healthy Choices

It's hard for many people to eat healthy, and it becomes even harder when they have to pass by a vending machine stocked with unhealthy snacks as they go about their workday. The same goes for trying to give up cigarettes when your co-workers are taking smoking breaks throughout the day.

"Workplace wellness needs to focus on creating a culture at work that supports healthy behaviors," says Michael White, president of WELL Street and author of "50 Activities to Make Your Workplace Happier, Healthier and More Productive. The workplace needs to make healthy choices easy and unhealthy choices difficult."

A study by Towers Watson found that top-performing employers "recognize that employees need a supportive workplace structure to become more accountable for, and improve, their health and well-being."

The most successful companies in the study have taken action to change the physical work environment to make it a healthier place or an easier place to get healthy. For example, 72 percent banned smoking either inside buildings or across their entire company campus, 33 percent encouraged exercise at the office by providing workout facilities or fitness classes, and 28 percent offered healthy lifestyle activities such as walking groups during the workday and incentivized employee participation.

Cleveland Clinic, a healthcare powerhouse, first banned smoking indoors and then across its entire campus, its director of wellness, Michael Roizen, told BloombergView last year. "You can't even smoke in the parking lot in your car," he said. "The first offense you get a warning, and the second you get fired. We fired two high-profile physicians who refused to quit. Then they knew we were serious."

What to Consider

- Add an in-office gym or offer free or discounted memberships to one nearby.
- Open a bike room and install showers so people can easily integrate biking to work into their routine.
- Ban smoking in the office or on the entire campus.
- Stop selling sugared drinks and unhealthy snacks in office vending machines.
- Provide healthy snacks at no cost to employees.
- Offer in-office fitness classes, diet groups, smoking-cessation programs and other healthy activities.
- Start a lunchtime walking group.
- Serve only healthy foods and drinks at company meetings and events.

Nurture a Flexible Workplace Culture

As companies have scaled back and asked employees to take on more and more work over the past few years, it's become an even greater challenge for workers to accomplish everything they need and want to do in a day. The most successful companies in the Towers Watson study had senior leaders who support flexible schedules that allow employees to find time to exercise and attend wellness programs with less scheduling stress.

Carrots and sticks are an essential part of most wellness initiatives, but in the end, they “are short-term solutions,” says White. “The culture, with leadership that values it, is the key.”

In many workplaces, it's not necessary to the business for everyone to start and end their days at the same time and take lunch together at noon. It's simple and costs nothing to implement policies that allow people to get in a full day's work while giving them the flexibility start at a time that works for them, and to take a long lunch or break in the afternoon, so they can participate in activities that boost their health.

New policies aren't enough to create a culture of flexibility though. If your company has always required employees to work a set schedule, you will have to work with executives and managers to help them see the benefits of flexible schedules and understand they can accomplish as much, if not more, when they allow employees to have more control over when they work.

What to Consider

- Allow employees to choose their work hours within an approved range.
- Allow employees to take a longer midday break and work later.
- Give employees a few hours of work time a week to use on wellness efforts.

Make it a Family Affair

The most successful companies in the Towers Watson study accounted for family involvement in helping employees to adopt a healthy lifestyle. Getting employees' spouses on board with wellness efforts helps increase support for healthy habits and encourage healthy environmental changes in the home.

For employers that offer insurance coverage to spouses and dependents, their employees' health directly affects the cost of coverage, so getting them to make healthy lifestyle changes can help save money.

Among companies that offer incentives to employees who take steps toward better health and healthcare decisions, 53 percent are offering incentives to dependents, which is an increase from 46 percent in 2011 and 39 percent in 2010.

What to Consider

- Include spouses in health plan communications materials.
- Offer incentives for spouses to make healthy choices.
- Give spouses access to the company gym or a discount to join the gym employees use.
- Include spouses in health-related programs and activities.

Use Sticks and Carrots

Rewards for participating in wellness programs and reaching wellness goals have become a common fixture in workplace benefits plans, with more than two-thirds of respondents to the Towers Watson study reporting they offered incentives.

Sixty-one percent of employers reported that they are using financial rewards, an increase from 36 percent in 2009. By 2013, another 21 percent plan to begin using financial rewards.

While penalties have traditionally been a less-popular tool for HR departments, more companies are beginning to use them, including 20 percent of Towers Watson survey respondents.

What to Consider

- Raise health insurance premiums for all employees, then give rebates for participating in approved wellness programs or meeting health goals.
- Raise the health insurance deductible for all employees, then reduce it incrementally for each wellness program they participate in or goal they meet.
- Offer employees financial rewards for participating in wellness programs or meeting health goals.
- Make employees pay a penalty if they decline to participate in wellness programs or meet health goals.

Conclusion

Wellness initiatives are not only a way to decrease an employer's health insurance costs; they are a way to take care of a business's greatest asset.

"We have to impress upon company leadership that their greatest asset, their employees, deserves the same care and attention that their ... equipment requires," says White.

If that's not enough to convince you, then consider this: Programs to boost employee wellness can also be presented as additional elements in a company's complete benefits package as way to help to recruit and retain top talent.

Even if your company lacks the resources to do everything suggested in this white paper, there are plenty of initiatives you can try implementing to boost your employees' wellbeing, save money on health insurance and build a top-notch employee base.

About Ebix Health

Ebix Health, a business unit of Ebix, is focused on delivering a better benefits experience for everyone. With our TalentWorks™ solutions, we're helping employers save time and money, improve employee satisfaction, and reduce compliance risks – all with the goal of significantly streamlining the way they manage benefits. And for employees, this means online access to the information they need to better manage their benefits and better manage their lives. With our BrokerWorks™ solutions, we're giving brokers the technology tools and resources they need to increase agency efficiencies, improve customer service, and drive new client acquisition.



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